

Intimacy and Professionalism: Dilemmas in the Practice of Chinese Podcasters

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Abstract

As an inherently intimate medium, podcasting offers new opportunities for journalists to engage in innovative media practices. However, for journalistic podcasters, managing intimacy and balancing it with traditional journalistic norms is an important but complex matter that affects the long-term development and democratic potential of news podcasting. This study focuses on a subject rarely studied: Chinese journalistic podcasters, both in terms of how they perceive and construct intimacy and their approaches to navigating the balance between intimacy and professionalization in their podcasting practices. Drawing upon in-depth interviews and document research, this study finds that by adopting humanized storytelling, emotive language, exposure of personal details, use of background audio, and natural dialects, etc., Chinese podcasters are redefining journalistic norms according to the specific demands of podcasting as an intimate medium. At the same time, they are also carefully guarding journalistic boundaries and are wary of abusing intimacy in commercializing podcasts and expanding the market. By examining these innovative practices, this study enhances our understanding of how news can continue to stay connected with the public amidst digital transformation. It suggests that the practices of these journalistic podcasters reflect the potential for revising the traditional norms of journalism in adapting to new technological environments.

Keywords

authenticity; boundaries; China; emotion; intimacy; journalism; podcasts; professionalism

1. Introduction

In the face of the digital disruption affecting the declining traditional news industry, podcasting has emerged as a popular choice among contemporary media outlets. Meanwhile, many media practitioners have

identified the independent opportunities of digital start-ups within the podcasting landscape (Park, 2017). As an emerging genre, the number and popularity of journalistic podcasts have both been increasing in the most recent decade. According to the *Digital News Report* by the Reuters Institute (Newman & Gallo, 2019), the significant rise of podcasts is a global phenomenon. In 2019, the number of newly created news podcast programs worldwide reached 12,000, reflecting a growth rate of 32% compared to the previous year. Many leading news organizations operating at national or transnational levels have ventured into the field and launched podcasting programs, attracting millions of listeners and followers worldwide. In 2020, the Pulitzer Prize established the Audio Reporting Award and included podcasts in its award category for the first time in its history, further solidifying the importance of podcasting in the realm of journalism and the digital transformation of news production (Linton, 2020).

As an emerging medium, podcasting distinguishes itself from traditional media forms by its inherent “intimate aura” (Llinares et al., 2018, p. 209). The technological specifics of the medium gear podcasts towards inhabiting intimacy as their defining feature (Euritt, 2022). The audio form affords intimate and personalized storytelling, allowing the podcasters to present themselves in contrast to the objective and disembodied reporters in traditional journalism (Lindgren, 2022). Nevertheless, while such intimacy has been found to be beneficial to journalistic podcasters in building a more engaged and reciprocal relationship with the audience and boosting the effects of news communication, it tends to be incompatible with the traditional norms of journalistic professionalism. The intimate (re)presentations of journalists on digital media may act to contradict the preservation of their professional images (Bossio, 2023; Bossio & Sacco, 2017; Cheng & Tandoc, 2022). The emphasis on intimate experiences in podcasting may prioritize form and emotions over content, relegating news to a secondary position relative to opinionated expressions (Nee & Santana, 2022). More seriously, the intimate relationship formed between podcasters and listeners may lead to ideological hijacking by partisan actors and endanger democracy (Dowling et al., 2022). Therefore, managing and mastering intimacy is an important issue for journalistic podcasters, and solid empirical research is needed to unravel the question of whether podcasting merely blurs the lines between intimacy and professionalism or if the two are completely exclusive, and how journalists handle the tension in their practices.

An examination of the existing literature reveals many studies of podcasting in different countries, including Australia (Lindgren, 2023), India (Mehendale & Jaggi, 2023), Spain (Sellas & Bonet, 2022), UK (Berry, 2016; Lindgren, 2023; Rime et al., 2022), US (Aufderheide et al., 2020; Berry, 2016), Denmark (Berg, 2021a), Latin America (Rojas-Torrijos et al., 2020), and South Korea (Park, 2017), but scant attention has been given to the way it is practiced in China. Like its Western counterparts, podcasting is developing rapidly in the country. Currently, there are over 240,000 podcast programs available in the Chinese market, with an audience exceeding 220 million, 65.12% of whom are young people living in metropolitan cities, including Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, and approximately 30 capital cities of provinces (“Ximalaya boke jiemu,” 2024). A number of popular podcast platforms have emerged, such as Little Universe, Himalaya, Dragonfly FM, and Litchi FM (“Ximalaya boke jiemu,” 2024). Chinese podcasters have even organized an annual event, PodFest China, which held its sixth iteration in 2024, attracting over 800 podcast creators and fans (“Women zai diliu,” 2024). Such a vast and fast-developing market deserves academic attention.

In the Chinese podcasting landscape, the rise of journalistic podcasts can be observed to have had two distinct trends. On the one hand, traditional media organizations have launched their own podcasting

programs, such as *Sanlian Weekly*, *Caixin Media*, *Southern Weekend*, and *Southern Metropolis Daily*. On the other hand, faced with the decline of traditional journalism, media practitioners have begun seeking alternative paths. Individual journalists have embarked on podcasting under their personal brands. For example, Xu Tao, the founder of the *Shengdong Huopo* (聲動活潑) business and technology news podcasting series, during her 10-year career previously worked as a journalist for media outlets including *Yicai Weekly*. Another instance is the cultural podcast *Left Right* (忽左忽右), co-founded by Cheng Yanliang and Yang Yi, who had previously worked as a cultural journalist and television news editor, respectively. Exploring how these podcasters balance their identities as journalists with the demands of the podcasting medium is a compelling area of inquiry. It raises important questions about how they adapt to this new technological landscape while maintaining the core journalistic values that inform their work, and how tensions between intimacy and professionalism evolve and are resolved in the process.

Drawing upon in-depth interviews and document research, this study examines what intimacy means to Chinese journalistic podcasters and what strategies they adopt to navigate the balance between intimacy and traditional journalistic norms. In the following sections of the article, we will first discuss podcast intimacy and professionalism in journalism. After detailing our research methods, we will then present an analysis of the balancing strategies utilized by journalistic podcasters and discuss their implications. Ultimately, our study attempts to promote a nuanced understanding of the creativity of Chinese journalists, represented by journalistic podcasters, in adapting to the new technological environment.

2. Podcasting as an Intimate Medium

Podcasting is regarded as an intimate medium (Berry, 2016; Euritt, 2022). Podcast intimacy, defined as efforts to create and reveal emotional experiences and personal connections in the comfortable space “between interviewers and interview subjects, between the producers themselves, and between listeners, producers, and subjects” (Spinelli & Dann, 2019, p. 77), is afforded by both the technological and ecological features of this specific media form.

As a sonic medium, the podcast is inherently warm as it uses voice, music, and sound to channel a message (Pettman, 2017). One of the greatest assets of podcasting has been the aural intimacy created through the human voice (Lindgren, 2016). As the human voice not only produces feeling but also transmits any number of emotions through the tone and quality of personalized expressions, it can create an affective soundscape through which the listener, subjectively feeling the sounds, becomes entangled in a reciprocal relationship with the produced sound (Clevenger & Rick, 2021). In particular, podcasts differ from traditional radio in being free from broadcast schedules, and available on-demand, affording a more personalized listening environment. The pervasive use of headphones allows podcasters to figuratively whisper their message directly into the ears of their audience (Greene, 2016; Hendricks, 2020). The listener puts on their headphones, presses play, and becomes immersed in an affective discourse of human experience through listening and connecting (Copeland, 2018). A sense of closeness is generated between podcast participants even though they are not physically proximate (Berry, 2016; Euritt, 2022; Swiatek, 2018). Additionally, podcasters use emotion and first-person narratives extensively to bond with listeners (Lindgren, 2023), and self-reflexivity and transparency are generally adopted by them to maintain trustworthiness with listeners (Dowling & Miller, 2019). Both are also found to promote podcast intimacy.

By generating strong feelings of closeness, the affordance of podcasts is thought to have transformative effects on social groups. The effect of intimacy has allowed the empowering potential of podcasts to emerge, along with the engagement of marginalized voices and dissident opinions (Wright, 2022). For instance, Richardson and Green (2018) have explored how podcasting can serve as a platform for amplifying feminist voices, arguing that podcasts offer an accessible and intimate medium that allows women to share their experiences and perspectives, which are often overlooked in traditional media. The facilitation of empathetic relationships between podcasters and listeners provides a safe and encouraging environment for them to reveal intimate and deeply personal information that they would otherwise hesitate to open up. Schukar (2022) has explored the affective potential of queer podcasts, demonstrating how the aesthetics of belonging, embodiment, and desire are created. The amplified voice and “hyper-intimacy” through podcasting afforded the possibility of sharing deep affective and embodied experiences for both the creator and the listener (Rodgers, 2023).

Meanwhile, podcasting and listening are believed to serve to bridge social divides, including temporal and spatial divides, knowledge divides, socio-cultural divides, and even the unequal digital public sphere (Swiatek, 2018). Scholars have actively examined how podcasting facilitated a sense of community when social contact was limited in the context of the pandemic (Lindgren & Bird, 2024; Nee & Santana, 2022). In a study investigating the affective impact of podcasts on listeners, Robson (2021) revealed that, for participants confined indoors due to the Covid-19 restrictions, podcast hosts assumed the role of companions, offering a sense of social connection for listeners in a physically distant environment. Through the on-demand, converged, and distinctive features of the medium, podcasts created mediated opportunities for listeners to experience a sense of normality in terms of mobility and freedoms, providing a kind of affective agency to help them make sense of the crisis.

Nevertheless, despite its potential to deliver pro-social and positive outcomes, podcasting is not without criticism. Podcast intimacy may entangle issues of public concern with personalized, sentimental perspectives, hindering the pursuit of objective truth while making the listener feel personally invested (Wendland, 2024). When podcasters emphasize listeners’ identification with personal narratives, dispassionate considerations may be lost, obscuring the discussion of crucial public issues (McHugh, 2016). For instance, Nee and Santana (2022, p. 12) argue that the emphasis on personalized storytelling in podcasting may prioritize form over content and render news secondary to emotions, exacerbating the “syndrome of post-truth.” Dowling et al. (2022) contend that emotional language can be employed as a powerful and persuasive tool for political propaganda, leading to ideological hijacking. Lindgren (2016, p. 38) believes that while intimacy contains expressive power, aiding the interpretation of news analysis and comprehension of news contexts, it also can carry the “risk of exploitation.”

Overall, podcasting presents both opportunities and dilemmas for producers. While it offers an affective and deliberative space that breaks free from traditional restrictions, it also creates a tension between individuality and public interest, and its intimate nature contradicts the traditional journalistic approach that emphasizes professionalism.

3. Journalistic Professionalism and Intimacy Dilemma

Journalistic professionalism refers to a range of issues in journalism, including the professional identity of journalists, their work routines, norms and ethics, training and certification, gatekeeping and quality standards, and so on (Deuze, 2005; Waisbord, 2013). As a summation of “good practices” in journalism, it reflects the boundary work of journalists, through which they seek control over the work they do and identify themselves as a distinctive group with expertise and prestige (Carlson & Lewis, 2015). Ideally, journalistic professionalism emphasizes a set of enduring values such as public service, value-free reporting, fairness, and justice (Deuze, 2005; Waisbord, 2013). But in practice, it is fluid, situational, contextual, and subject to negotiation, and processes of de-professionalization or re-professionalization are intertwined and constantly evolving (Splichal & Dahlgren, 2016; Wang & Meng, 2023). The perceptions and performances of professionalism of journalists are also the result of contingency and hybridity, influenced by personal ideology, organizational structure, journalistic tradition, media culture, and the technological environment (Mellado et al., 2017; Wang & Li, 2024).

The cornerstone concept of journalistic professionalism has been objectivity, which includes such sub-concepts as impartiality, neutrality, and detachment (Schudson & Anderson, 2009). In particular, to maintain professionalism, journalists are required to be emotionally detached from the events and stories they cover and avoid being influenced by the subjects they report (Richards & Rees, 2011). It has long been considered that objectivity and emotionality are fundamentally contradictory terrains in journalism and that the two should be mutually exclusive (Richards & Rees, 2011). However, with the disruption of the news industry by digital technologies and social media, many traditional values of journalistic professionalism, including objectivity and detachment, have gradually changed and been redefined (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). Emotions, first-person expressions, and other affective practices are gradually being accepted by journalists in the digital environment and taken as effective means to engage the audience and improve communication (de Bruin et al., 2022; Kotisova, 2020; Wang, 2023).

While subject to changes, professionalism ultimately serves to promote the self-understanding of journalists and the social acceptance of news and journalism (Örnebring, 2009). In recent decades, the rise of digital technologies has challenged the legitimacy of news media and threatened the professional claims of journalists (Tong, 2017; Wang & Yin, 2024). On the one hand, traditional media are pressured to converge with new and emerging media, and in the process, the journalists’ sense of professionalism tends to be gradually diluted as they adapt to new environments and carry out diverse and multiple tasks. On the other hand, in the age of social media, it is difficult for journalists to exhibit a distinction between their personal and professional images, leading to a trend of mixed identities for journalists. In particular, there seems to be a difficult gap to bridge between intimacy and professionalism in the practices of journalists. A study conducted by Bossio and Sacco (2017) in Australia showed that it is common practice for journalists to post highly intimate “selfies” in parallel with “breaking tweets” that highlight the professionalism in journalism on their social media platforms. Distinguishing the two is a difficult task, and it requires journalists to carefully manage the contradiction and complexity between intimacy in interacting with the audience and professionalism represented by objectivity, neutrality, and detachment. Further studies by Bossio (2023, p. 1780) suggested that journalists may be prone to present an “authentic, aesthetically pleasing, and intimate image” on social media, especially on image-oriented platforms such as Instagram, but these were only moderate presentations that did not harm their professional images. At the same time, journalists have

been observed seeking to redefine professionalism through intimate practices (Meng & Wang, 2025). In a study comparing traditional fashion journalists and fashion bloggers on social media, Cheng and Tandoc (2022) found that fashion bloggers always introduce themselves in an approachable and intimate way, often including personal details in their posts, whereas fashion magazine journalists hope to complement their professional image with an easily accessible “girlfriend to girlfriend tone,” and establish an intimate connection with readers in order to gain their loyalty and trust. These studies indicate that although the tension between intimacy and journalistic professionalism is unavoidable, the two are not irreconcilable, and the possibilities lie in the details and nuances of journalists’ new practices in the digital environment.

The intimate aspect of podcasting has led to it being a venue for experimentation in innovative journalism practices, with the potential to reinvent existing norms. Scholars have come up with contradictory findings regarding the relationship between podcasts and traditional journalism. While some found that podcasting represents a reappraisal of journalistic values such as objectivity (Dowling & Miller, 2019), others argued that the sonic elements and headphone-based listening environments represent a subversion of the norm of objectivity (Lindgren, 2023). Therefore, podcasting serves as an important example to examine what kind of balance journalists keep when venturing into new territories in the digital media environment and especially how they navigate between intimacy and professionalism, which seem to be contradictory, paradoxical, and conflictual.

4. Research Questions and Methods

Based on the above discussions, our study focuses on journalistic podcasters in China, asking two research questions:

RQ1: How do Chinese podcasters perceive and construct podcast intimacy?

RQ2: How do they manage the dilemma between podcast intimacy and the pursuit of journalistic professionalism?

We used in-depth interviews and document research to answer these questions. The targets of our research were journalistic podcasters with a traditional journalism background. PodFest China, initiated by JustPod, a leading Chinese podcast startup, is the first and biggest podcasters’ conference in China (“Women zai diliu,” 2024). Based on the guest attendance list of PodFest China over the past six years, we identified 37 journalistic podcasters who have worked in traditional media, including on television, in news magazines, and on radio. We contacted each of them for in-depth interviews, and 15 agreed to our interview request. The interviews were conducted from November 2023 to September 2024. Most interviews were conducted face-to-face, and five were through voice calls. The shortest lasted for 30 minutes, and the longest was 153 minutes, with an average of 56.1 minutes. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. In addition to the interviews, we searched public resources and collected the public remarks of these podcasters on their podcasting experiences. Based on multiple platforms such as Google, Baidu, Weibo, WeChat, Little Universe, Himalaya, and Apple Podcast, our search yielded a total of 35 documents, involving 15 podcasters on the list, among whom six podcasters were also interviewed by us. These materials, spanning from January 2018 to May 2024, include 12 media reports, 20 podcast talks, and three public lectures. The podcast talks and public lectures are in audio form and we transcribed the key content into

texts for analysis. Overall, the lengths of these materials range from 3,011 to 40,401 words, with an average of approximately 15,232 words.

In total, our study has involved 24 journalistic podcasters. They all have at least one year of work experience in the podcast industry, and the longest-serving journalist has 11 years of podcast production experience. The average number of years of podcasting is 4.87. For anonymity reasons, we used alphabet letters (A–X) to code and present them. The analysis followed the thematic analysis procedures proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). We first listened to all the audio documents including podcast episodes and taped interviews and read the text documents to familiarize ourselves with the data. Then, concentrating on the RQs of this study, we reviewed the documents and observed relevant details and themes. Our analysis focuses on how the journalist podcasters reflect on their podcasting experience, how they aspire to professionalize this highly personalized medium, what their views on the construction of intimacy are, and how they strike a balance between intimacy and professionalism. We present the research findings in the next section.

5. Research Findings

5.1. Recognizing Intimacy

Through analysis of research data, we find that Chinese podcasters are well aware that intimacy is central to podcasting practice. They share a consensus that podcasting is an intimate medium, and this is the feature that distinguishes it from the media form they previously experienced. In particular, they believe that the use of sound and voice is the key to constructing intimacy. According to podcaster D, “Humans naturally have a greater emotional attachment to voice,” and once the audiences become familiar with the voice of a podcast host, they will develop an “intimate stickiness” (D, podcast talk, 11 January 2022). In their view, compared to depersonalized and institutionalized media, podcasting, as a special medium, should benefit from using voice to maintain its intimacy, as also stated by podcaster G:

[The quality of] podcast relies on your voice. This doesn't mean that you simply make your voice at random, but it requires that you truly present yourself with your way of speaking, your tone of voice, and your view of things. You need to let audiences know that you are a real and living person. (G, interview, 4 September 2024)

Many believe that an authentic voice is crucial for establishing an intimate relationship between the host and the audience, and this is related to the context in which audiences listen to podcasts:

The scenario of listening to podcasts will be quite personal, whether you're doing some housework, sleeping, doing makeup, or commuting. And at that kind of moment, when you feel someone's voice right next to your ears, it just gives you a sense of intimacy, both in terms of your listening experience and your environment. (Q, interview, 26 May 2024)

Podcaster P further explained the reasons for the intimacy brought about by listening to podcasts in commuting scenarios, believing that this intimacy largely stems from the interaction between the voice of podcasters and the listening environment. The listener's perception and subjective feeling towards that voice also shape the sense of intimacy:

Picture you're driving a car and passing the scenery outside, and you are also listening to a podcast. Although the voice in your headphones doesn't describe the scenery you see outside, you feel that they are communicating. It's an interactive relationship between voice and landscape. Your eyes are looking at the scenery, and there is a person's voice in your ears at the same time. It's the voice you choose to listen to. Together, they give you a very intimate experience. (P, interview, 25 May 2024)

Furthermore, podcaster W suggested that the intimacy of podcasts derived from their companionship function, which was regarded as the underlying logic and characteristic of podcasting. This sense of companionship differentiates podcasts from other media, rendering it a new utopia for building connections and emotional bonds between hosts and listeners (W, media report, 6 May 2022). This observation was echoed by podcaster A, who believed that the construction of intimacy should act upon emotions in "the formation of a tacit understanding between the podcaster and audience" (A, interview, 18 November 2023). He compared the intimacy brought about by listening to podcasts to the kind of intimacy someone experiences when communicating with his or her partner before bedtime (A, podcast talk, 23 December 2022). In such an intimate relationship, "if you find that the host is trying to pretend to be someone different from himself or herself, the feeling of deception arises and it can be devastating" (A, podcast talk, 23 December 2022).

Nevertheless, while recognizing the central role of intimacy in podcasting, the podcasters also realized that the use of intimacy has a two-sided effect: if used well, it can enhance a podcast; if used poorly, it can discredit it. Our analysis shows that Chinese podcasters adopted four strategies to navigate the balance between intimacy and professionalization: maintaining neutrality, limiting personal details, managing sound and voice, and guarding journalistic boundaries. We explain these in turn in Sections 5.2–5.5.

5.2. *Maintaining Neutrality*

As a core element of journalistic professionalism, neutrality has been valued by media practitioners in various countries, especially in the Western world (Hanitzsch et al., 2010; Ojala, 2021). Neutrality emphasizes a non-interference mindset, which means that journalists should not influence readers' views on the reported events in any way (Ojala, 2021). Adhering to neutrality requires adopting an independent observer's position and only disseminating facts in news reporting (Ojala, 2021). Previous studies argued that journalists from non-Western environments including China (Márquez-Ramírez et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2017) tend to be more interventionist in their reporting and have moral perspectives. But to Chinese podcasters, cautioning against interventionism, adopting a neutral stance, and avoiding biased expressions are strategic in balancing the inherent intimacy podcasting conveys.

Podcaster F who runs a program specializing in telling human-interest stories, is a typical example of emphasizing the importance of being "a neutral observer":

I entered the media industry in 2010 and have been doing the job for 11 years....I've presented countless stories of other people, but no single episode tells my own story. This may be related to my personality and journalistic beliefs. I've always regarded myself as a recorder and observer. Although I'm the host of the program, I won't be the protagonist. (F, podcast talk, 8 September 2021)

Especially when the stories being told have aroused strong feelings and raised heated debates among the audience, podcaster F would “pay extra attention” to neutrality and be “extra careful” not to make a judgment nor to preach and express his own values (F, podcast talk, 8 September 2021). He sought to objectively present complex and thought-provoking stories of humanized individuals, leaving the interpretation of complexity to the audience:

If your story conveys a truthful reality, it is already effective on your listeners. So usually when I’m recording a podcast, I don’t end with a summary, say, what kind of values this story illustrates, because the story itself already explains everything. (F, podcast talk, 27 January 2019)

Similarly, podcaster C also believed that recording a podcast was a process of “conducting in-depth interviews with people who stand on different sides and have different experiences of the same event” (C, media report, 7 July 2022). In this process, “the hosts should not state their personal views but guide the audience to gain new knowledge from multiple dimensions and new perspectives” (C, media report, 7 July 2022). Podcaster B, who came from a magazine journalism background, concurred and commented:

I was just asked the same question a while ago: Why don’t you express your opinions more? Why are you always asking questions and not expressing yourself? Actually, I have my own thoughts on every topic, but I think as a host, I should let the guests talk more. However, when I encounter views that I disagree with, I’ll definitely choose to express and challenge the guests. But I don’t force anyone to accept mine. (B, media report, 15 October 2020)

To the podcasters, intimacy is a built-in feature of podcasting, and through it, the relationship between the podcasters and the listeners is already much closer than other media forms afford. Therefore, the podcasters need to avoid reinforcing the closeness but instead maintain some distance. Podcaster A admitted that he never touched on “grand narratives” in his podcasts, but rather approached topics from the perspective of human interest and emotions: “This is what podcasting is about” (A, interview, 18 November 2023). However, he will not go further to offer his interpretations of the story to intervene in listeners’ perception, as “the humanized stories and characters are already attractive enough to the listeners, and more is not beneficial but could be damaging” (A, interview, 18 November 2023). The podcasters felt deeply that the flip side of intimacy could be emotional or ideological hijacking. Prioritizing human interest stories and personalized storytelling while adopting a neutral stance in podcasting can effectively resolve this dilemma, maintaining fans’ loyalty without damaging the intimacy between the audience and the podcasters.

5.3. Limiting Personal Details

Exposure to personal stories and details can assist podcasters in enhancing intimacy with their audience while ensuring that the listeners can trust their high-quality podcast content. In this study, we have found the use of personal stories in many podcasters and their programs. Some podcasters may reveal details of their personal lives, such as hobbies, to bond with the listeners. For example, podcaster F collected various sounds from the natural environment of his hometown, and integrated these sounds into his podcast production, sharing his childhood memories and experiences with his audience in the form of sound (F, podcast talk, 27 June 2022). Others may incorporate their personal stories in podcasting to enhance the

listening effects. Coming from a TV news background, podcaster U highlighted her emphasis on the sharing of personal experiences when talking about the different approaches she took in podcasting:

From being a TV host to being a podcast host, becoming particularly authentic is a significant change for me....Another change is that I'll moderately use my personal experiences to induce others to speak. I always believe that a good answer is not actually inspired by interviewing skills but by an interviewer's sharing of personal experiences. (U, public lecture, 25 May 2024)

Similarly, before becoming a podcast host, podcaster V was an investigative reporter in a news magazine. She said that an important change in her journalism style was to start talking about herself and telling her personal stories: "Traditional journalism restricted freedom of personal expressions of individual journalists, but podcasts allowed you to break free from this confinement" (V, public lecture, 25 May 2024).

But at the same time, these podcasters are consciously aware of the need to impose a limit and manage the use of personal details. They have a tendency to showcase their personal stories to achieve stimulating effects while taking care not to overuse personal exposure. Podcaster A said:

When I became a professional podcast producer, I knew I had to bond with my audience on a personal level and resonate with them. Sometimes I share my own experiences when discussing news topics, but it's very limited. My experiences are there to help listeners understand the news better, not to make myself the focus of the story. (A, interview, 18 November 2023)

He believes that telling some of his own stories is necessary, but it must be in line with the topic. Talking about personal anecdotes relevant to the podcast content can help reduce the distance from the audience and enhance intimacy. But the legacy of journalistic professionalism prompts podcasters not to over-indulge in self-expression in storytelling. Podcaster X remarked that sometimes he would deliberately share his own stories in order to stimulate guests to talk about theirs during the interview, but in the editing process, he would cut out his own stories and only keep the guests' stories: "For this reason, some listeners criticized me for having no personality, but maintaining a bit of mystery will be good for me and the show in the long run" (X, interview, 20 September 2024).

To balance intimacy and professionalism, podcasters may use newsletters or additional space for showing personal details and telling personal stories. For example, podcaster B actively uses newsletters to share her personal experiences and stories, such as bird watching, walking in the park, and chatting with tea farmers, as a way of communicating with the audience and collecting their suggestions (B, podcast talk, 26 January 2022). Podcaster G found offline activities to be very useful in establishing personal bonds with the listeners. He organized face-to-face meetings with his listeners almost every year, in which he shared his personal experiences and some details of his personal life (G, interview, 4 September 2024). But overall, the podcasters recognized telling personal stories and experiences should be an audience-oriented practice, the role of which is to be closer to their listeners and enhance the companionship aspect of podcasts. The appropriate degree of personal disclosure is an important factor in the success of this strategy. Excessive sharing of personal details can be irritating to listeners and distract them from the main content. Hence, these particular podcasters from journalistic backgrounds are cautious in using personal details. As Podcaster A said, "We should be very careful not to become the social-media influencer type of host" (A, interview, 18 November 2023).

5.4. Managing Sound and Voice

Sound and voice are among the most important factors defining the quality of podcasts (McHugh, 2022). “Narrative voice, ambient sound, and music” has been found to contribute to the success of a podcast, especially in terms of creating an intimate atmosphere to boost listening effects (Dowling & Miller, 2019, p. 178). But in order to balance between intimacy and professionalism, sound and voice need to be managed, so that they appear in the right way to benefit rather than degrade a podcast program. In this study, we have found that journalistic podcasters are mindful of managing sound and voice to enhance intimacy on the one hand and ensure their quality and acceptance by the audience on the other hand.

As in the instances described by Lindgren (2023) where award-winning Australian and British podcast journalists tend to use “a chatty tone of voice” to tell the stories (p. 709), the Chinese podcasters are also well aware of the necessity of distinguishing themselves from the old-fashioned TV or radio hosts. They avoid making themselves sound as if they are reading a prepared script, and they tend to adopt authentic and natural voices rather than using trained and standardized ones. One of the strategies followed is to adopt natural accents. Podcaster T explained from the audience’s perspective what accent means to a podcast:

I think the audience wants some professionalism, but not everything needs to be so formal. They want something unique, and they appreciate you being you. I deliberately keep some of my accent in my podcasts, not because I can’t speak standard Mandarin, but because I think the accent adds to my style. I think listeners like feeling more connected, guessing whether I’m from the north or south, and then remembering me as a host with personal characteristics. (T, podcast talk, 24 November 2023)

She believed that avoiding standard Mandarin was a gesture to reject the “broadcast” label and retain the “podcaster” identity and it helped construct a unique “voice image” for her. Similarly, podcaster D said that initially, she required the guests appearing on her show to speak standard Mandarin and not to have too much of an accent. For this reason, she was not able to cover many topics because of the accents of the guests. But later she changed her mind, admitting personalized voices in her program, and refraining from eliminating innocuous mistakes, repetitions, and mood words of her guests in editing, because “that’s how people talk” (D, podcast talk, 1 November 2021).

However, this is not without limits. Although the podcasters accept accents and even deliberately create some accents to boost the authenticity of the show, they maintain the standard that “it should not affect listeners’ experience” (X, interview, 20 September 2024). Behind this is the fact that these podcasters have an idea about what the “ideal” kind of voice should be, and they impose professional control to achieve that. Drawing on years of experience in audio editing in the podcast industry, podcaster L explained how he pursued the “ideal voice”:

When editing audio, we often manage to make a person’s voice sound warm, which is a very comfortable way to communicate with others. We want to create the feeling of the sound of the voice lingering in the ears of the listeners and make it like someone speaks closely to a certain part of your body. (L, interview, 8 December 2023)

After years of practice and reflection, he felt that naturalness should not be confused with rawness and roughness, and sound and voice need to be modified. While preserving a sense of natural flow and personalized features, sound processing procedures should be in place to “clean” the audio by cutting off noises, catchphrases, and redundant information: “Otherwise it will damage the audience experience” (L, interview, 8 December 2023). In addition, he habitually incorporates ambient sound, a type of background or environmental noise, into his podcast to provide the audience with an immersive and authentic feeling.

However, professional editing does not solve all the problems that hinder podcasters’ pursuit of the “ideal voice.” Podcaster M said she once hosted a financial news show but had to abandon it because she did not have “the right voice” (M, interview, 8 December 2023). She recalled that she thought she was trying to present a natural voice to her audience, but the audience was dissatisfied and commented that her voice was “too sweet and felt immature.” As the host of a relatively hard news format like financial news, she was expected to speak with a tough and authoritative voice, which she didn’t have. So, she decided to move on to the backstage of the show: “There is nothing I can do about it because I was born with this voice” (M, interview, 8 December 2023).

5.5. Guarding Journalistic Boundaries

The intimate aspect of podcasting has tended to blur journalistic boundaries, making it difficult for listeners to strictly distinguish between personal and professional content. At the same time, in the process of commercialization, podcasters often intuitively rely on intimacy or even abuse intimacy, to sell products and generate revenue, further exacerbating the blurring of journalistic boundaries. Analyzing the research materials, we found that these journalistic podcasters are generally wary of the commercial use or overuse of intimacy in advertising, pay attention to the need to balance commercialism and journalism, and guard journalistic boundaries.

These podcasters hold ambiguous views regarding the commercial use of intimacy. With the development of the podcast industry, commercial operations have become inevitable. Commercialization is one of the important driving forces for them to continue producing podcasting programs, and it is also crucial for the sustainable development of the podcast industry (Berg, 2021b). Intimacy seems to be a convenient and readily available tool for podcasters to pursue their commercial goals. Given that most of the podcast programs run by individuals or groups in China are start-up projects operating in the form of entrepreneurial journalism, sufficient income is particularly important for them to achieve long-term survival and support the production of continuous, stable, and high-quality content. But at the same time, podcasters believe that listeners need to be protected from advertising, and the intimacy that they develop with podcasts should not be monetized.

Formerly a newspaper journalist, Podcaster H believed that the “emotional stickiness and companionship” derived from the intimacy of podcasts are the most unique and appealing features of the medium (H, media report, 8 January 2021). The sense of closeness that voices bring to the audience is much stronger than images, text, and videos. But he also realized that the unguarded acceptance of podcast content by audiences may trigger the abuse of podcast intimacy. Although commercial goals are justifiable, podcasters should not prioritize commercialization:

What are we doing podcasts for? I think the first reason is for enjoyment, the second is to make a living, and the third is to make the world better. I think as podcasters, creating even a little bit of enjoyment for our listeners is valuable. I believe that in the end, we should do podcasting for this purpose, not for commercial things. Commercialization only makes us do it better. (H, podcast talk, 20 November 2020)

An important strategy adopted by the podcasters is the attempt to maintain the boundary between journalistic content and advertisements. From the moment podcasts began to attract people's attention, advertising has become an important practice, providing financial support for content creators. But from the audiences' perspective, advertisements are often perceived as annoying interference (Brinson & Lemon, 2023). These podcasters believe that if the advertising information is cleverly conveyed by their favorite podcast host, the audiences' aversion to the advertisement may decrease.

Podcaster J said that in his program he would strictly distinguish between content and advertisements, ensuring that the needs of advertisers are met while protecting the audiences' intimate listening experience (J, interview, 7 December 2023). Podcaster M mentioned that she often had conflicts with her marketing colleagues as she valued the priority of content over advertisements, protecting podcast content from excessive commercialization (M, interview, 8 December 2023). Podcaster N has also argued that clearly separating content from advertisements was an effective way to prevent content from being infringed upon by advertisements:

Unlike embedding advertisements into specific podcast content, this approach distinguishes content and advertising into two relatively independent parts. It ensures the audience's immersive listening experience is not interrupted. Also, directly telling the audience at the beginning that this part contains an advertisement may also prepare the audience psychologically, and they may not have a feeling of being deceived when hearing the implanted advertisements. (N, interview, 7 December 2023)

Many podcasters noted that the commercialization of podcasts should be a gradual process, and forcing the pace of the commercializing progress may cause listeners to become irritated, which is fatal to the long-term growth of podcasts. Some podcasters have become hesitant in the pursuit of commercialization through advertising, questioning whether they should give advertisers access to the intimate space they have maintained with listeners. As podcaster B said, advertising is not the only funding source, and there are other ways to make a living (B, interview, 21 September 2024). Although she is still in the exploratory stage, she has discovered the potential for generating revenue through alternative methods such as paywalls, membership fees, offline activities, etc., and she believed that her program would gradually develop a sustainable business model without compromising the quality of podcast content (B, interview, 21 September 2024).

6. Conclusion

The Chinese podcasters examined in this study, who have backgrounds in mainstream media, entered the podcasting industry for various reasons, but they remain committed to producing high-quality content. Although they currently do not have a clear definition of what constitutes a professional podcast program, they tend to reach a consensus that professionalism is the principle that must be followed when producing a podcast. In the production process, due to the influence of podcast intimacy, these podcasters do not feel

the need to completely de-personalize when pursuing professionalism, as traditional media practitioners do, but feel they should use personal features appropriately. Therefore, the practices of this specific group of podcasters in China can be understood as the pursuit of professional podcast content while highlighting personal features and striking a balance between intimacy and traditional journalistic values.

On the one hand, by adopting human-interest angles, personalized storytelling, background audio, natural language, dialects, etc., Chinese podcasters are redefining journalistic norms according to the specific demands of podcasting as an intimate medium. On the other hand, they tend to balance podcast intimacy and professionalism through strategies such as maintaining neutrality, limiting personal details, managing sound and voice, and guarding journalistic boundaries to avoid over-indulgence in the close relationship with listeners and protect them from advertisements. Some strategies, such as revealing personal details, are relatively difficult to operate in practice, and once excessive or inappropriate information is exposed, it may deal a fatal blow to the bond between the podcasters and their audience. However, even if their strategies are flawed in many ways, their practices should be considered meaningful, reflecting the creativity of Chinese journalists in adapting to the new technological and economic environment.

In summary, this study reveals that Chinese podcasters recognize the intimate nature of the podcast medium. They embrace podcast intimacy and actively leverage this affordance while also managing and regulating intimacy through control mechanisms to emphasize traditional professional values. These podcasters continue to pursue professionalism in the podcast sphere, which may be compromised by intimacy. By balancing intimacy and professionalism, they present new possibilities for preserving publicly-trusted journalism within the podcast sphere.

A large amount of research related to podcasts has focused on the context of Western countries, and a significant contribution of this study is to provide a de-Westernized perspective on podcast research, presenting the case of China and providing an insight into the development of podcasts in one of the most populated countries in the world. In addition, this study has focused on podcasters from journalistic backgrounds, and it enhances our understanding of how news can continue to maintain its connection with the public in the course of digital transformation.

There are of course limitations to this study, and future research is needed to deepen the understanding. First of all, podcasting is a rapidly growing market in China, with over 220 million listeners and more than 240,000 commercially viable podcast programs ("Ximalaya boke jiemu," 2024). We only studied journalistic podcasters, thus ignoring the programs created by podcasters without a journalism background. Secondly, although podcasts are typically "intimate media," there are other forms of journalism, such as short videos, thriving in the digital environment based on the stress on the value of intimacy. Comparing podcasts with these media will provide a more nuanced understanding of the dynamic relationship between intimacy and professionalism.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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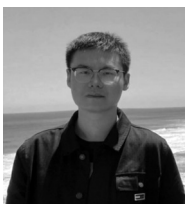
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